

# OPERA VILLE

FRIDAY, JUNE 15, 2012

## San Francisco Opera, The Magic Flute



June 13, 2012

By Michael J. Vaughn

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ABOUT ME



MICHAEL J. VAUGHN

Michael J. Vaughn is the author of six novels, including *Frosted Glass* (Dead End Street, Seattle) and *Rhyming Pittsburgh* (LBF Books, Pittsburgh). His poetry has appeared in more than fifty journals, including *Skidrow Penthouse* and *The Chaffin Journal*, and he works as a judge for several *Writer's Digest* competitions. He lives in San Jose, and plays drums for the San Francisco rock band *Exit Wonderland*.

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it can be nudged in provocative directions by merely shifting its visual environment. For SFO's new production, Artist Jun Kaneko has created such a captivating re-imagining that it sometimes feels like someone held an art exhibit and an opera broke out.

Kaneko's background drawings carry the crayon roughness and primary-colors of children's art, but are pulled into surprising, elegant complexities.

Animated projections (Clark Creative Group) convey the sense that these works are being created on the spot, and also serve some important theatrical functions: illustrating the creative process itself, conjuring a fantastical world that is almost alive, and smoothing out the flow of



an opera with an enormous number of scene changes. A sudden burst of black scrawls accompanies the entrance of the Queen of the Night, and the tests of fire and water are powered by tendrils of orange and red ceding to waves of blue and green.

A second fresh element is the new English translation by SFO general director David Gockley, which makes sense in a number of ways. First, a primary luxury enjoyed by Mozart in Schikaneder's theater outside Vienna was the freedom to create a work in the same language spoken by the audience. Secondly, the rhythmic similarity between German and English provides a smooth musical transition. Thirdly, the move opens up an extra level of humor fueled by the subtleties of language. Gockley makes free use of slang and topical humor: the Three Ladies' reference to their boss as a "flaming queen," Papageno's claim that he practices "sustainable bird-catching," and a running reference to the opening scene's "Chinese-inspired dragon." And who wouldn't love a line like "I'd cook her eggs and tasty grits, make love until we called it quits"?

It's almost too bad that the company offered a pre-performance announcement of Alek Shrader's cold, because I doubt if anyone would have noticed. Shrader sang Tamino with the clearest of lyric tenors, and only began to fatigue toward the end of the evening. Soprano Heidi Stober provided the most touching



musical moment, a performance of Pamina’s “Ach, ich fühl’s” threaded with a spinning, vibrant tone. Russian coloratura soprano Albina Shagimuratova performed the Queen’s famed showpieces with stunning agility.

Baritone Nathan Gunn opted for a more likeable, less goofy Papageno, opening up a deeper empathy for the birdcatcher’s moments of doubt, but still getting the most of his many funny lines (“Brotherhood, Schmotherhood!” he exclaimed, and I would have to agree). His outfit – always a central concern for *Zauberflöte* buffs – is a Rubik’s cube bodysuit augmented by an egg-holder backpack. Soprano Nadine Sierra, an SFO Adler Fellow, joined him with a vivacious Papagena.



Tenor Greg Fedderly performed an energetic, sleazy Monostasos, and it was lovely to hear the rich music for the boys’ trio sung by actual boys: Etienne Julius Valdez, Joshua Reiner and John Walsh. The Three Ladies were a familiar and welcome group: former Rhinemaidens Lauren McNeese and

Renee Tatum, and Melody Moore from last season's world premiere of "Heart of a Soldier." The Ladies' costumes took an interesting trip from Mouseketeer to Motown girl-group. The men's chorus gave a powerful reading of the temple chorus, "O Isis and Osiris." Bass Kristinn Sigmundsson gave Sarastro an imposing presence but not quite enough thunder in the challenging low notes.



Conductor Rory Macdonald led the orchestra in an extraordinarily clean, crisp performance. Stage director Harry Silverstein's understated approach to movement worked well with Kaneko's wild sets (perhaps the same kind of challenge offered to lighting designer Paul Pyant, who had to avoid conflict with the everpresent projections). Tamino's flute calls brought forth a whimsical assortment of elongated woodland creatures, similar to Central American woodcarvings; the cuteness award goes to the birdlings representing Papageno's future offspring.

The inherent contradictions of the opera may, in fact, be a principal reason for its constant popularity. Like Hamlet, it offers an unsolvable labyrinth of meaning and intention. If the Queen is so terrible, for instance, why does she provide protective instruments to Tamino and Papageno? And although the Queen resorts to violent measures, what gives some pseudo-religious priest, spouting abstract ideals with no real substance, the right to go around abducting other people's children? When Kaneko went to stage director Silverstein for his interpretation, he answered, "...none of the people in Mozart's world are either simply good or bad. Rather, their lives and needs have driven them to do what they feel is necessary and correct."

Jun Kaneko's book "Magic Flute," a chronicle of the production's creation, is available in the San Francisco Opera Shop.

Asides: Had to love the moment when the temple speaker called for silence – immediately followed by someone in standing room knocking over a loud, jangling bottle. The show is a co-production with the operas of Washington, D.C., Omaha, Kansas City and Carolina. I cannot recall another production where the designer received a bigger ovation than any of the performers.

Through July 8, War Memorial Opera House, 401 Van Ness Avenue, San Francisco. \$21-\$389, 415/864-3330, [www.sfopera.com](http://www.sfopera.com).

Michael J. Vaughn is the author of "Operaville," a novel and companion CD available at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com). His poem, "How to Sing," is forthcoming in the literary magazine *Confrontation*.

Photos by Cory Weaver:

Albina Shagimuratova (The Queen of the Night).

Nathan Gunn (Papageno).

John Walsh, Joshua Reinier, and Etienne Julius Valdez (The Three Boys) with Heidi Stober (Pamina).

Alek Shrader (Tamino) and the animals of the woods.

Greg Fedderly (Monostatos).

POSTED BY MICHAEL J. VAUGHN AT 1:15 PM

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